

## SHOUTS &amp; MURMURS



## NO THANKS

BY DAVID OWEN

ON Christmas Eve four years ago, my daughter, who was seven, suddenly sat up in bed and gasped, "Oh, no! Thank-you notes!"

I sympathized. When I was little, my anticipation of Christmas began around the middle of February and consisted of equal parts mounting excitement and creeping dread. I began composing next Christmas's wish list before this winter's snow was off the ground, but my yearning was tempered by the certainty that I would have to pay—and pay big. Christmas morning seemed to end before it began, but thank-you notes stretched way into January.

My antipathy to enforced gratefulness is the result, or perhaps the cause, of my mother's belief that gift-giving is partly a test of the recipient's manners. Every present under our Christmas tree was just the visible tip of an iceberg of obligation. My mother tracked each package as meticulously as a U.P.S. driver, and her master list haunted my siblings and me for the rest of winter vacation. Bells would be ringing, snow would be falling, our friends would be sliding down our street on brand-new Flexible Flyers—and my sister, my brother, and I would be bent over tear-spattered sheets of stationery, whimpering.

When my wife and I began our married life, my natural queasiness about matrimony was deepened by our swelling debt of gratitude. Every day, the mail brought another wok or toaster oven that had to be effusively acknowledged and then ex-

changed for something else. How much more joyous those first weeks of togetherness would have been if every gift had been accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed postcard preprinted with the message "Gift received in good condition—many thanks!" and by a sales receipt. Instead, with every day that passed I had a growing sense that all across the country throats were being cleared. Our supposed benefactors—like doormen extending gloved palms—were impatiently awaiting their due.

A few years ago, my wife's brother married a citizen of what was then the Soviet Union. After a straightforward ceremony at the Moscow Palace of Weddings, they moved to New York. Living in the United States involved many adjustments for my new sister-in-law. Some of them—for example, getting used to her new ability to walk into a Food Emporium at nine o'clock at night and buy a pint of Häagen-Dazs coffee ice cream—were easy. Others were not. One of the hardest was thank-you notes. "Russians don't write them," she told me, with exasperation. At first, she had thought her American mother-in-law was joking. Then, suddenly, the dark side of democracy sank in.

To that extent, my children would rather be Russians. A couple of years ago, I tried to ease their burden by teaching them to write thank-you notes the way Daddy does: on a computer, with lots of boilerplate text that can be cut and pasted.

They caught on immediately, and made refinements of their own, such as the discovery that the liberal use of clip art can make a short letter seem long without arousing the suspicions of a pre-digital grandmother. Still, the minimal effort involved in composing even a single all-purpose paragraph seems excessive to them. Why not abandon the exercise entirely?

This year, in anticipation of the holidays, I have been working on another idea. With the help of an off-the-shelf computer program, I have created a new legal document, called a Power of Beneficiary. I am going to send one to every person who normally gives me presents, and it will permanently relieve me of the obligation to thank them. In effect, it will authorize my relatives and friends to be grateful to themselves, in my stead, for their kindness to me. Similarly, I plan to extend to others the right not to thank me for anything I might give them—perhaps through another legal document, an Irrevocable Waiver of Gratitude.

Despite the foregoing, I am not opposed to all forms of overt appreciation. There are even times when I myself enjoy being thanked, as in "Thank you for setting me straight on that," or "Thanks for pointing out the logical flaws in my attempted refutation of your ideas." The key, I guess, is unexpectedness: the gratitude of others is most pleasing when it does not seem to be a mere side effect of a brutally disciplined upbringing. The only way to cultivate this sense of spontaneity—fortunately—is to be stingy with one's gratefulness. If every kindness is promptly acknowledged, the impact is lost.

These are radical ideas, I realize. But they are sensible, and they are overdue. For your time and consideration, I thank you in advance. ♦

